Antonakos and the Architecture of Illumination

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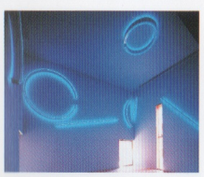
The most conspicuous characteristic of art during the past half century has been the hybridization of mediums, typified by the work of such leaders in their respective fields as Andy Warhol (who combined painting and photography), Richard Serra and Frank Stella (who create sculpture aspiring to the condition of architecture), and Frank Gehry (whose architecture is deeply informed by sculpture). Another artist of their generation whose work defies easy classification within a single medium is Stephen Antonakos. This is particularly true of Antonakos' public installation pieces, most of which (made from the 1970s onward) have been called light sculptures, although that term is somewhat inaccurate in that he employs neon light in a more painterly way than Dan Flavin did with his sculptural fluorescent-tube assemblages, and in a less cinematic way than James Turrell's luminous constructions.

The outdoor neons that Antonakos exhibited in the early 1970s soon led to commissioned works that inevitably engaged their architectural settings, as was specifically intended by the artist's new constituency of patrons. In many instances, Antonakos was called upon to enliven undistinguished structures with his light sculptures, and in very few instances has that included settings of real architectural distinction. (Two notable exceptions have been his *Neons for the Carpenter Center* of 1992, a temporary installation at Le Corbusier's only executed building in the United States, and his *Blue Room* of 1995 at Ricardo Legorreta's San Antonio Public Library.) Although Antonakos has accepted the context of his commissioned work philosophically, there is no doubt that his series of sixteen small, pristine, Platonically proportioned Greek Orthodox chapels of the early 1990s onward represented his aspiration to an architectural perfection conspicuously lacking in many of the places he was invited to improve with his art.



Blue Room (view), 1995

In the sense that large public art works require financial patronage, Antonakos has cast his lot with architects, who need a client if they are to achieve large scale in the public realm. Most artists have been free from such dependence on patrons since the rise of the bourgeoisie in the seventeenth century, when painters no longer needed to rely on princely or clerical protectors and found a new market for their pictures among the burgeoning merchant class. To be sure, Antonakos has always pursued his interest in drawing, and has produced numerous domestically scaled mixed-medium wall pieces that incorporate neon, but his attraction to architectural scale is unquestionable.

The Zen proposition that a building is not four walls but rather the space contained within four walls helps explain the way in which Antonakos looks at architectural context. Speaking of one banal setting that many artists would have winced at, Antonakos says, "I saw the space and thought to myself, 'I'll take advantage of it.' I try not to get caught up in saying anything about the building." To a great extent this equanimity has worked to Antonakos' advantage, for artists who are asked to compete with strong architecture often find their works are overpowered by it, or are reduced to mere decoration.

The minimalist architecture of the 1960s and 1970s was roundly denounced by the Postmodernists of the 1980s for its alleged lack of functional signifiers: What kind of building is this? How do I enter it? What distinguishes it from other kinds of buildings? A number of Antonakos' early public installations addressed those perceived deficiencies, which were more pronounced in schemes in which minimalism was more a matter of cost control than aesthetic purification. For example, his *Red Neon Circle Fragments on a Blue Wall* of 1978, created for the Federal Building in Dayton, Ohio, emphasized the Brutalist structure's nondescript entry in a most useful way, just as his *Neon for the Bagley Wright Theater* of 1983 in Seattle added an appropriately festive flourish to a building used primarily at night. Public places customarily bereft of any art – particularly transportation terminals and stations of several kinds – have turned out to be among the most hospitable venues for Antonakos' installation pieces. The perception of the built environment by people in transit is an inescapable aspect of modern life. It has been addressed in architecture most bravely by Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi, whose pioneering study *Learning from Las Vegas* of 1972 acknowledged the fact that America's urban sprawl is now most often viewed from speeding cars, which requires a very different kind of civic design than that which sufficed for older cities experienced by pedestrians. Antonakos' 1980 installation over escalators at Atlanta's Hartsfield International Airport and his 1991 commission for the new Los Angeles subway system in particular demonstrate his intuitive understanding of how to brilliantly exploit the most ungrateful of contexts –places whose users are often in such a rush that they are oblivious to their surroundings – and turn them into memorable experiences, if only on a subliminal level for many people. In those and other similar commissions in the subway systems of Boston and Buffalo, New York, Antonakos used the ceilings of escalators, tunnels, and other passageways to bravura effect, drawing the eye irresistibly upward and claiming the totality of a space in a way that wall-mounted pieces alone cannot. Movement through space is explicitly addressed by the title of *Procession* of 2000, the neon installation Antonakos devised for the Ambelokipi Station of the Athens subway system. Here his overhead reiteration of strong geometrical forms – squares and circles – pierced by long neon tubes that undulate along the processional route down from street level to the train platform seems to propel the traveler along his way.

Procession (view), 2000

Among the sixteen neons at Ambelokipi Station are a few of extreme simplicity, such as the sixteen-foot-wide arc that imbues the broad passageway it surmounts with the authoritative dignity of a Classical

temple, but without overt references to ancient tradition. This is not art for extended contemplation (as is the case with Antonakos' neon-and-metal-leaf wall panels of the early 1990s onward) but rather art that valiantly and successfully combats the sensory nightmare that mass transit has become.

Antonakos carried off a similar act of architectural alchemy at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts (alma mater of his daughter, Evangelia), with *Once Again* of 2001, a work that permits more reflective appreciation if only because university students are somewhat less hurried than commuting workers. Installed in an 85-foot-long tunnel connecting the school's library and science building, the underground passageway was not merely dreary but potentially dangerous. Raceways mounted on the ceiling conceal neon tubes that bathe the 20-foot-high space with a warm glow, and at either end incomplete circles in contrasting colors of neon overhead break the spell as one reaches one's destination. There is no better example in this segment of Antonakos' extensive oeuvre of how much can be accomplished with so little.

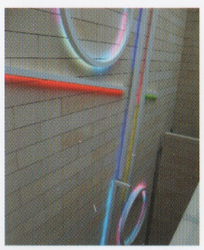
Once, Again, 2001

One problem shared by artists working in the public realm and architects is the tendency for both to become quickly typecast as specialists in one kind of commission. Just as it is difficult for even an experienced architect to get a commission for a particular building type if he has not built one already, clients will also turn to the same architects and artists for commissions so similar to their already executed schemes that the risk of rote repetitiveness is high. Asked to embellish a parking garage at General Mitchell International Airport in Milwaukee, Wisconsin Antonakos responded with a noteworthy departure from his earlier terminal pieces in his *Double Sequence* of 2002.

Double Sequence (view), 2002

As always, he responded to the architectural surround, which in this case was not some hermetic, featureless conduit, but instead a light-filled walkway (or, more accurately, a people mover) framed with grids of white-painted steel and transparent glass. The softly suffused effects made possible by interiors with no natural light were not an option for the artist here. Instead, he countered the insistent orthogonal motif with large curvilinear neons, in which the tubes are turned toward the viewer, rather than concealed in raceways and allowed to wash against an opaque wall or ceiling. In one instance, a rectilinear red neon slyly mimics the right angle of the structure just below where a wall column shifts 90 degrees to become a roof beam, and Antonakos subversively places it out of alignment with the grid, though at the same upright angle.

Among the most impressive works of Antonakos' career has been *Ascension* of 2003, at the National Bank of Greece headquarters in Athens, designed by the Italian-Swiss architect Mario Botta. Through a quirk of urban development, one massive beige stone side elevation of the adjacent building is flanked by a vestigial strip a mere twelve feet deep. Given that the wall is 100 feet high, the viewer's sense of disproportionate scale is much like sitting in the first row of a movie theater and craning up at the screen. Leaving aside trompe-l'oeil perspective, there is little way that such an uncongenial surface could accommodate a conventional mural, making the selection of Antonakos an inspired choice.



Ascension (view), 2003

Although the artist conceived the arrangement of large circles juxtaposed with straight and serpentine lines as an integral composition, he understood from the outset that viewers would not be able to step

back far enough to read the piece in its entirety. Fortunately, balconies on three widely spaced stories of Botta's structure give onto this shallow but soaring skylighted space, allowing portions of *Ascension* to be observed head-on. Segments of the installation above or below a chosen vantage point are of course distorted by perspective, giving the composition a mutable quality that makes an artistic benefit out of an architectural deficiency.

An even more daunting challenge was Antonakos' charge from the Aeroporti di Puglia in the Italian port city of Bari. During the first half-century of air travel there was a concerted effort to invest aviation terminals with some of the grandeur of railway stations, including the incorporation of painting or sculpture into an architectural type that necessarily differed from transportation prototypes of the nineteenth century. As mass air travel grew exponentially after the 1960s, far less attention was paid to such grace notes, happily revived in this commission.

Orizzonte, 2005

Just as Antonakos had already worked out the relation between immobile art and moving travelers, he quickly grasped the requirements of this unusual installation. The resulting work, *Orizzonte* of 2005, is mounted on the upper stories of long, relatively low-rise Bari air terminal. In the confined spaces Antonakos has often been given to work with, there was usually a finite number of ways in which his contribution could be viewed. Here, however, the work would be seen not only from planes approaching or departing the airport on the ground, and from cars arriving at the terminal, but from the air as well. It had to be bright enough to be seen at night, but not so bright as to compete with the airport's navigational illumination.

Two groupings of neons comprise variations on the same theme of circle and emanating lines: in one case an incomplete red circle with red and blue lines both straight and undulating, in the other a full pale green circle with a broken series of three segmental lines. The obvious (though non-representational) symbolism of the globe and the lines we all associate with travel routes is typical of Antonakos' way of implying but not spelling out meaning, allowing for varying interpretations in keeping with his non-dogmatic expectations about how is art is to be understood.

The internationalization of both the art world and architectural practice begs the question of how Greek an artist is the Laconian-born, New York-based expatriate Antonakos. Certainly both his cubic, white-walled chapels, inspired by the private devotional structures characteristic of the Orthodox faith he devotedly observes, as well as his cruciform, gold-ground neon wall panels, which owe so much to Byzantine icons, leave little doubt that his Hellenic birthright is a major wellspring of his art. But what about the pre-Christian heritage of Greece, the Classical tradition that has informed architecture for 2500 years?

Classicism has waxed and waned in influence throughout centuries of Western culture, and reappeared during the late 1970s and 1980s in the new guise of Postmodernism. Antonakos and such contemporaries as Flavin and Turrell, to say nothing of Donald Judd and Serra, resisted the new fashion that had a notable impact on architecture, painting, and design as the third quarter of the twentieth century began. Throughout, Antonakos has remained true to his minimalist principles of the 1960s and

1970s, and he has thereby been able to evoke the power of Classical antiquity all the more convincingly when he chooses to because of that abiding integrity.

Emblematic of evoking the essence of Classicism without resorting to its surface signifiers – accomplished incomparably in Modernist architecture by Louis Kahn – is Antonakos' *Passage* of 2005 at the European Cultural Center in Delphi. Aside from a roof, there is nothing more elemental in architecture than a doorway, and this temporary installation (which one yearns to see permanently realized) emphasizes that quality with an atavistic directness.

Flanking the portal are two red-painted raceways that are hieratic enough in the full light of day, but after dark the real magic begins. At night, the two angled masonry retaining walls perpendicular to the doorway were bathed in red-orange light, highlighting the sloping stone walls that hold back the earth berm around the museum's base. One half-expected the heroine of a Greek drama to emerge from this hieratic gateway and begin declaiming the opening passages of some ancient tragedy.

Passage, 2005

Le Corbusier's famous and unimprovable definition of architecture as "the skilful, correct, and magnificent play of forms assembled under light" has, during the decades of Antonakos' career, been largely overlooked in terms of the importance of light in creating internal space (the biggest exception to that omission being Kahn). The way in which modern artists have inspired architects, most clearly from Frank Gehry onward, suggests that the illuminating oeuvre of Stephen Antonakos deserves closer scrutiny as much for its architectural implications as for its artistic ones.